Recoding Gender: Women's Changing Participation in Computing by Janet Abbate (review)

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(Review)

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sumers’ affective capacities. By traveling deep into the hitherto hidden bowels of the Las Vegas gambling industry, we begin to recognize disturbing everyday scenes when we tune into our laptops, iPods, and Facebook accounts.

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Recoding Gender: Women’s Changing Participation in Computing.


The first time I heard that computing was once mostly done by women, I thought the speaker must be mistaken. I entered the world of computer science in 1978 and I certainly didn’t see many women around me then. Furthermore, I knew women whose computer science careers were already well established in 1978, and I had never heard any of them mention an earlier, vanished utopian era in which women ruled computing. There wasn’t much of a field of computer science before that so this information simply did not compute. Soon after, I learned that when digital computers were first developed, women were employed as programmers, mainly because people mistakenly assumed that programming was rote work much like typing or filing. “Oh!” I said. I felt a sinking disappointment as belief sank in.

“Many people are surprised that women have a long history in computing,” states Janet Abbate in the very first sentence of Recoding Gender. That is certainly true, and I am one of those people despite having spent my career in computing and its applications. This book explores the untold history of women in computer science and programming, starting from the Second World War when most programmers were women, to the current day in which women have become significantly underrepresented in this field. While Abbate’s primary goal is historical, she also aims to influence current policy to address underrepresentation.

The experiences of these early programmers are described in their own words in chapter 1, “Breaking Codes and Finding Trajectories: Women at the Dawn of the Digital Age.” The excitement and good times they recounted were evocative of my college days when I first learned to program. Programming was just flat-out fun. In discovering the world that one could create within the computer, I felt a bit like Alice falling through the looking glass to discover another reality. On the flip side, in chapter 4, “Female Entrepreneurs,” the challenge described by the women entrepreneurs of dressing to achieve the right balance between professional image and feminine identity is all too familiar.
There is a factual point I feel I must set straight. The book makes multiple statements such as “Women’s numbers have declined since the mid-1980s.” This is not accurate; the proportion of women to men has declined, but simultaneously, the number of women in computer science has risen substantially from over 32,000 computer science bachelor’s degrees awarded to women in 1984 to more than 57,000 in 2004, as reported in National Science Foundation data. While this distinction may appear to split hairs, it reveals a different picture. Women are not “running away” from computing; in fact more women than ever are drawn to it. However, even more men join as well. Thus, the problem is not a female exodus, but an increasingly unbalanced participation and an increasingly unbalanced workplace.

Possible causes of these imbalances are explored in chapters 2 and 3, “Seeking the Perfect Programmer” and “Software Crisis or Identity Crisis?” These chapters describe the changing metaphors for computing in different eras, and the ways in which metaphors evoke stereotypes associated with jobs and roles for women and men. Metaphors for programming have shifted from that of a rote “clerical” task in the 1940s to the highly technical and skilled profession of “software engineering” in the twenty-first century. The first was viewed (both then and now) as a job appropriate for women, and the second for men. Prevailing metaphors and the associated gendered stereotypes still clearly influence the professional choices made by young people of both genders today. Chapter 5, “Gender and Academic Computing,” describes approaches for combating the resulting isolation that women may feel in what has become a male-dominated field, including the Grace Hopper Celebration founded by Anita Borg.

Through the stories of early women programmers such as the World War II “Wrens” who worked on top-secret code decryption, entrepreneurs such as Stephanie Shirley who created and ran her own computing firm, and current-day computer scientists such as Anita Borg, Abbate does a marvelous job of describing the excitement, fun, and satisfaction that women past and present have found, and will continue to find, in computing work.

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